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ABSTRACT

Anthropological fieldwork is characterized as the most human methodology of the social sciences. Fieldwork brings the researcher into intimate relationships with the host people and facilitates perception of the unexpected activity of general social processes and understanding the initially perplexing conduct of the hosts. Fieldwork also has natural limitations. It is a methodology most easily used by either an individual or a small nuclear family and is most easily applied to small natural wholes, such as isolated groups. During the past generation there have been attempts to adapt fieldwork to the study of institutions or systems within modern urban society, using large research teams, with complex divisions of labor. Findings, particularly in relationship to research on schools, are encouraging, but reveal significant methodological difficulties. It is too early to tell how successful researchers will be in adapting the fundamental principles of fieldwork to the study of social entities in modern urban society. Because of the human values which it exemplifies the human quality of the interaction, fieldwork will continue to be an important member of the system of techniques employed by social scientists. (Author/MH)

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ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK

COMMENTS ON ITS VALUES AND LIMITATIONS

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We are going to concentrate our remarks about research methodology, in particular that method which is central to cultural anthropology, and which variously is known as fieldwork, participant observation, or doing ethnography, and which may be regarded as a species of "qualitative research methodology." We are going to explore the assets and limitations that inhere in the nature of fieldwork and how these shape the research effort, the findings, and the published report. Throughout we will be alert to the human values implicit in the fieldwork process. If there were time, we should like to analyze how the nature and values of fieldwork affect the kind of policy critique that is developed in the context of educational research and development; however we have not been able to cram that within the framework of an oral paper designed for delivery in a paper session.

The work "fieldwork" is used to cover a considerable range of methodological practices (Wax & Cassell 1979; Hatfield 1973). During most of our discussion, we shall focus on the most normative variety, as represented by the classical investigations of Bronislaw Malinowski /Margaret Mead (M.L.Wax 1972). Such fieldwork has been frankly and vividly described in several recent books, including those by Rosalie H. Wax, Laura Bohannon, Hortense Powdermaker, Jean Briggs, Marian Slater, and we shall thus have a set of examples to which we can recur. In specifying that fieldwork has this referrent, we are deliberately excluding certain marginal types of research, such as that represented by Laud Humphreys in his study of "tea-rooms," or by those who have done participant observation as taxi-cab drivers or dispatchers.

The fieldworking ideal is represented by James G. Frazer's claim (1922,1961;vii) in the preface to The Argonauts of the Western Pacific that Malinowski had lived as a Trobriander among the Trobrianders. Not a great deal of knowledge of fieldwork is needed in order to expose the pretentiousness of that claim. To live

To live as a full adult member of the Trobriand society--as that society was early in this century--would have required an array of skills requiring years to master, and an involvement in activities that would have been so preoccupying as to have left but little room for Malinowski's work as an ethnographer. Nevertheless, the fieldworking ~~ideal~~ ideal has been to live with the host people as intimately as possible.

Simultaneously, a less publicized aspect of the ideal has been for the fieldworker to retain a scholarly commitment to the academic profession and to maintain elaborate sets of fieldnotes and records, which would be analyzed both in the field and later in the scholarly study. Thus, even in the midst of fieldwork, the researcher is a person of two worlds--the world of the host people, and the world of the schclarly discipline--so that what is produced from the fieldwork is the product of that tension. (R.Wax 1971;42-55;139-142).

This tension in the role of the fieldworker is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the realm of values. For, on the one hand, the fieldworker has been reared within a Western society and been further subjected to the intensive socialization of graduate study within a scientific discipline; yet, on the other hand, she or he must then suspend some of these values in order to participate with dignity and grace in the intimate life of the host people. The resulting stresses can be troublesome and sometimes very shaking. When Powdermaker did her fieldwork within a rural community of Mississippi during the 1930s, she (1966:Pt III) found herself in anxious conflict on such simple matters as addressing Negroes by titles of civility--Mr. and Mrs. When Briggs did her fieldwork (1970:Ch.6) among the Eskimo, she found herself in conflict when she wished to protect them from the avariciousness of the hunters who had flown in from the"lower 48," while her native hosts wished to extend to these visitors their customary norms of hospitality.

In the literature of social-science, there is a strong emphasis upon the primary group and primary associations. These are the groups, like the nuclear family, whose relationships involve the whole person and engender such emotional intensity that they shape the character and being of the child, as well as having marked influence on the adults. In fieldwork, the researcher deliberately places the self into such an environment, with its intensities, pleasures, and displeasures, its familial and interpersonal tensions and satisfactions, ceremonials and rituals. Truly, the primary group is the matrix--or womb--of the most deeply held values. Accordingly, fieldwork exposes the researcher to the full range of human experiences and of evaluative conflicts. Fieldwork can be regarded as an experience in radical resocialization during which the self is put at risk. As Robert Ezra Park remarked some forty years ago:

> The child born into a society may be said to go through the same process of socialization as the stranger who is finally adopted into a new society.

We have been talking of fieldwork in a stereotypical or idealized fashion--exemplified by the work of Malinowski, Mead, or others among small bands of exotic, technologically primitive people: Malinowski among the Trobriand Islanders during World War I, Mead among the peoples of New Guinea during her long and productive lifetime of research beginning in the 1920s, and others who found small enclaves where they might practice the traditional arts of fieldwork.

But in the context of these annual meetings, this form of the methodology must seem archaic or recherche. Likely, there were fewer Trobriand Islanders, or fewer people on Manus, than there are present at this 1979 annual meeting of the AERA. And, if we wish to perform research that is advisory to a metropolitan school system, such as that of San Francisco, or Chicago, or New York, we do seem to require some methodological stretching.

It is easy to see that fieldwork could be adapted to the study of the single classroom. During the schoolday, the classroom is an ecologically

bounded and enclosed unit, and, at least in the elementary levels, the pupils are confined to that room and that teacher, and in association with each other. for many hours of many days per year. Assuming that dropout and turnover are reasonably in bounds, the classroom fosters the development of primary associations and primary groups, and thus lends itself to intensive study by the fieldworker. Not surprisingly, there have been a fairly large number of such studies of classrooms.

Methodologically these classroom studies are deficient in several significant ways. On the one hand, they do not follow the lives of the pupils outside the single classroom. While the researcher may follow the pupils into other areas of the school: the playgrounds, toiletrooms, gymnasium, lunchroom; it is seldom or never that the pupils are followed into their extra-school existence, back to families, neighborhoods, peer groups, after-school employment or other activities. Also, and even more typically, the researcher cannot follow the teacher into the larger world of the school as a whole, nor can the school itself then be linked to the larger external systems.

We might digress and note that there have been school situations which were small enough so that they could be encompassed by the procedures noted, without methodological stretching. The obvious example is the one-room school among the exotic community, as was studied for example by Harry Wolcott among the Kwakiutl Indians on an island off the west coast of Canada. Wolcott was able to become acquainted with the entire population of the community, and could understand the pupils in relationship to that total milieu. Moreover, the linkage to the exterior system of school governance was from himself, functioning as researcher and teacher, to the relevant and distant authorities of the Canadian government. Such a case has theoretical interest to ourselves as educational researchers, but would scarcely be regarded as methodologically an exemplar for the metropolis.

It has also been possible to adapt fieldwork to the situation of the small town, particularly the kind of rural region where the children attend a single elementary or high school. Fieldworkers--and usually these have been couples or even families of husband, wife, and schoolage children--have been able to visualize the township as a whole, and to place the school and its classrooms within that whole. This kind of project has a history of several decades from the studies conducted by Warner, Havighurst, Hollingshead, and associates to the Experimental Schools Project recently completed under funding by NIE and supervised by Abt Associates. Parallel studies have been conducted elsewhere in the world.

Since our focus in this session is on values, we must note that one of the dilemmas of the fieldworker is precisely in the area of the necessity to protect the hosts. As a member of a scholarly discipline, the fieldworker is oriented toward publication that would include the frank and intimate details of the lives of the people involved in the schools. But, as a person who has been accepted by a host community and been socialized into a responsible adult status within that community, how can the researcher reveal intimate details to an alien and critical audience? For Malinowski in the 1920s, writing to an educated British audience about the conduct of isolated nonliterate exotic folk, we should guess there was but little problem. But, for the recent or modern fieldworker, whose writings on the community may find wide distribution or even become the texts for class reading by persons intending to teach in that particular community, the dilemma may become very painful. Not much has been written here, but what there is has been graphic (as in the case of the restudy by Art Gallaher, Jr., of the small Missouri town that had originally been studied by Carl Withers), or professionally-politically controversial as in the case of a city in New York State that was called "Springdale" by Vidich and Bensman.

To return to the issue of methodological stretching, the seemingly natural way for fieldwork to be adapted to the study of metropolitan schools is by the institution of the research team with a life span of several years. In such a team, some persons can be delegated to perform classroom ethnographies, such as we have mentioned above. But, other persons can be assigned the task of studying the administrators and their interconnections, while others can be asked to study the informal interactions of hallways, playgrounds, cafeterias, and gymnasia. Conceivably, with a large enough team, and sufficient time, there could also be some coverage of the family and neighborhood.

But, the paradoxes of such a research team center about issues of size, cost and complexity (cf Cassell 1978). In traditional terms, the research ideal was the young Malinowski sent on a pittance to work for several years among the Trobrianders. A large research team must be headed by a senior person, who can negotiate on equal status with both the funding agency and with the school system under study. But . Senior researchers command relatively high salaries, and so the project usually buys only a piece of his or her time, and the individual who should be most thoroughly and intimately involved with the fieldwork is instead parttime and preoccupied with other duties at the university or institutional base. The actual fieldwork then devolves onto a host of junior persons, usually graduate students, and their efforts must then be coordinated by a project director. Now, the great advantage of fieldwork is its flexibility and intimacy and its opportunity for prolonged intimate interaction between the researcher and the hosts. But, given a complex project dealing with as sensitive a host institution as a public school and as meticulous a sponsoring agency as those of the Federal Government, the research team is moved toward formality, rigid research designs, and bureaucracy. A central dilemma arises even about the keeping, storage, and retrieval of fieldnotes and other research data. In traditional ethnography, the researcher relies on his or her research notes and engages with these notes in a continual process of

inquiry. Or, in the case of a congenial couple that jointly conducts research, there is such high interaction and mutuality, that each is aware of the data being gathered by the other, and of its relevance to their research problems (R. Wax, unpublished MS). However, in the case of a large research team, the sheer volume of notes by disparate persons means that a highly formalized system of classification and storage must be instituted. Not only does this introduce a high degree of rigidity into the research process, but it frequently leads to a situation of underutilization of data. Great quantities of notes are accumulated, but relatively small portions can be utilized for analysis and reporting.

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It has been said of ethnographic fieldwork--as of anthropological studies of small exotic communities--that it does not see the forest for the trees. By this criticism it is meant that the fieldworker concentrates on the micro-aspects of the social world, on the intimate personal relationships within a small group, and therefore ignores--or leaves out of focus--the larger social world--the world of nation states, rival imperialisms, multi-national corporations, world religions and international ideological movements. Or, thinking just of North America, the focus on the classroom can leave ignored, or out-of-focus, the environment of school bureaucracy, ethnic and racial stratification and struggles, and national political and economic conditions.

Within the context of a discussion of values, there is a simple and effective response, namely that the only reason to concentrate on the social forest is to understand the human trees. For it is these individual trees--be they named Joe Kurihara, Roselyn HolyRock, Socrates, Ghandi, Hendrik Gideonse, or Joseph Schwab, be they outstanding and eminent or be they the humbler individuals about whom no literary records have been kept--who, for us, constitute the elements of value. It is these individual trees--an oak, a

beech, a redwood, a raspberry bush, a poison ivy vine, and how they help and hinder each other--that concerns us. So too when we reflect on a metropolitan school system, we can consider the distribution of reading scores of thousands of children; yet, when all is said and done, we come at least to this particular teacher assisting this particular child in acquiring the wonderful art of reading.

We do not here wish to enter into the game of academic or methodological arm-wrestling in which the point is to put down an alternative type of methodology. such as sample survey research or educational tests and measurements, while extolling the unique virtues of one's own methodology. For those who enjoy the debate on rival methodologies within the social sciences, there is an ample polemical literature, with significant misunderstanding and bigotry among all parties. (The naivete of the present level of debate is demonstrated by the sponsorship within the AAAS of the prize "intended to encourage in social inquiry the development and application of the kind of dependable methodology that has proved so fruitful in the natural sciences." We submit that in the natural sciences, researchers do not cast about for "dependable methodology" but first focus on significant problems and then try to devise procedures which will enable them to respond to those problems.)

Fieldwork is one of the most wonderful if taxing methods that have emerged within the social sciences. More than any other method, it attempts to understand and portray the intimate daily lives of ordinary people. But, fieldwork should be and can be more than a particularistic portrait of a unique individual. By its very nature, fieldwork is designed to assist the scientist in discovering that which is patterned, which is more general, that which is an example of the generically human. Let us see how this is so.

At its simplest, fieldwork exposes the social reality beneath the mythic distortion. A simple example may be taken from our own fieldwork among the

Oglala Sioux of Pine Ridge (R.H.Wax 1971; Wax, Wax, & Dumont 1964). Initially, we thought that among the Indian children a sizeable proportion would dislike the federally operated schools, and we imagined that the more traditionally INdian were the children, the more they would be alienated from the school. Instead, to our bewilderment, we found children claiming to like school and to be eager to attend. It took us a while to appreciate that the liking of school was genuine and was grounded in several important facts: first, that the school served pleasant and nourishing meals (and this was especially important to children of families who were desperately poor); and, second, school was a center where a child could meet and socialize with peers.

Going further, fieldwork can provide the basis for exposing the existence of a social process that is general but unexpected in this context. Again, an example from Pine Ridge may be illuminating. What especially puzzled us was the transition in the nature of the classes in the school. In the primary grades, the children were responsive to the teachers and eager participants in the classwork. But in the intermediate grades, there was what seemed to be a conspiracy of deliberate and noisy stupidity that sabotaged any kind of public recitation. And, by the upper elementary grades, the Indian students seemed to withdraw from the classwork into a deliberate policy of silence and nonparticipation. Most attempts to explain this phenomenon centered on a statement that Indian children were "shy"; logically, this made little sense, since they should have manifested the shyness in the primary grades, not in the upper elementary grades where the average student might be aged forteen or fifteen. Alternate explanations focused on the gradual development of negative self-images:

> It's because by then (fourth or fifth grade) they're beginning to realize that to be an Indian is to be lousy, filthy, and poor. They're beginning to think, "What the hell." They see that their teachers are fools (R.H.Wax 1971:257).

But in our observations in the classroom and our conversations with Indian children we found no evidence of negative self images (and our view here was confirmed by Fuchs and Havighurst). Instead, what finally penetrated our intelligence was that the children in the primary grades, like all little children, were oriented to adults, parents, grandparents, teachers, or older siblings. Thus, when their parents told them to learn, they tried very hard to do what their parents and the teacher told them to do--and during the first years at school they tried so hard that by the fourth grade many were doing better than white children. When other children tried to tease or interrupt them, they ignored them. But by the time these children had reached the fifth and sixth grades, the agent of socialization had shifted from an older and authoritative person to the peer group. Any student who tried to learn or who obeyed the teacher was teased, tormented, and, sometimes, even physically abused by his or her peers. By the seventh or eighth grade, the power of the peer group had become almost absolute. When our Indian colleague, Mrs. HolyRock observed a seventh and eighth grade classroom, she told us: "It was just awful...it was like she (the teacher) had a room full of dead people and she was trying to talk to them" (R.H.Wax 1971:251-266).

Conventional teaching techniques deal with children as if they were isolated units in the classroom, basically competitive with each other, so that the success of one child lies in the demonstration of failure of another. The Sioux children resisted and successfully frustrated any such effort at placing them into competition with one another, or establishing any system of invidious comparison.

That Indian children--or any group of children--who develop together through the successive classrooms of a school should then form a peer society of great strength should not be surprising to social scientists--once we think about it. But we are impressed at how long and with how much effort at fieldwork it took us to gain this insight, and we continue to be impressed at how this finding of a general social process tends to be ignored in educational literature. We would suggest that this is an artifact of research methodology, that pencil and paper tests or related kinds of surveys, are improper instruments for discerning the existence and potencies of peer societies.

Where fieldwork as a research method is unique is in its ability to enter into the world of meaning of the group or community in question. That world is perhaps best understood when we approach it through the distinctive language or dialect of the community, or even the distinctive terms or argot. So when Becker and Geer were studying "boys in white," the students in a medical school, they were led to place great stress on terms unique to that situation: words like "crock" or "pearls." In the fieldwork conducted by a variety of researchers among traditional American Indian peoples, there was the realization of crucial differences between Indians and Western peoples in respect to notions of health, social harmony, or again in respect to notions of leadership and excellence. These differences are much too elusive for us to explain in the compass of a short paper. The point however is that traditional Indians conceptualized their world far differently than do the

peoples of the West and that without the insights derived from fieldwork, observers--even reasonably scholarly observers--have thought of Indians as childlike, or irreligious, or illogical, or lazy--or indeed have applied to Indians any number of terms of derogation deriving from Western conceptualizations of the world.

Earlier we characterized fieldwork as being the most distinctively human methodology of the social sciences. Perhaps you can now begin to appreciate the several levels on which this is so. Specifically, that fieldwork brings the researcher into personal and intimate relationships with the host people, that it enables the fieldworker then to perceive the unexpected activity of general social processes, and to understand the initially perplexing conduct of the hosts by entering into their cultural and linguistic worlds. On the other hand, it is clear that fieldwork has a natural limitation, in that it is a methodology most easily used by either an individual person or a small nuclear family. Moreover, it is most easily applied to small natural wholes, such as isolated bands or groups of people. During the past generation. there have been a series of attempts to adapt fieldwork to the study of institutions or systems within modern urban society and to do so by the use of large research teams, with complex divisions of labor. The findings from these teams, particularly in relationship to researches on schools, are noteworthy and encouraging, but they reveal a number of significant methodological difficulties. It is too early to tell how successfully researchers will be in adapting the fundamental principles of fieldwork to the study of social entities in modern urban society. One might be tempted to suggest that fieldwork can only be conducted within the framework of small exotic--so-called "primitive"--societies. In making such a quick and negative judgment one forgets that fieldwork as a disciplined methodology is hardly as old as this

century (M.L.Wax 1972), so that it is too early to forecast the ways in which it will evolve or be adapted. Our own judgment is that because of the human values which it exemplifies, and because of the human quality of the interaction that it engenders, fieldwork will continue to be an important member of the system of techniques employed by social-scientists.

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